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STATINTL

Nixon Backs Hoover in FBI Flap

By JERRY GREENE and JAMES WIEGHART

Washington, April 3—Despite growing controversy here over the continuing role of J. Edgar Hoover as director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, there emerges now the authoritative word that President Nixon is not contemplating any change.

Attorney General Mitchell, who is known to have discussed the situation with the President, made the Nixon position clear this week when he told an interviewer who asked about the Hoover tenure:

"I expect him to stay in the job as long as he is in good health and is able to do the job as he is doing it now."

Then Mitchell said the question was asked of the wrong man, for the FBI directorship was a presidential appointment.

"I would guess if you were to talk to the President," Mitchell said, "you would get the same answer."

The flap over the FBI, stemming only partly from accusations made by former special agents, boiled up on the



heels of one of the worst secrecy breakdowns in the FBI's history—the theft and partial publication of more than 1,000 confidential investigative documents from the bureau's Media, Pa. field office.

Additionally, informed sources disclosed that other government intelligence agencies have been concerned by an FBI decision making a large cut in the number of liaison officers who formerly coordinated activities and information. Some agencies feel that the reduction in the liaison force has created a national security problem.

But an FBI spokesman, inspector Tom Bishop, categorically denied that there has been any sort of breakdown in intelligence liaison. He also rejected other charges which have been leveled publicly and privately at the 76-year-old Hoover.

In fact, Bishop countercharged that the barrage of criticism in recent days was part of a conspiracy "to drive Mr. Hoover out of the FBI and into retirement."

Former President Lyndon Johnson granted Hoover, a longtime personal friend, an exception to the mandatory age 70 retirement provision in the federal law in 1965, and the director now serves at the discretion of the President. Under a special law, Hoover is entitled

to full pay of \$42,000 a year for life upon retirement.

The White House is not unduly concerned by the steady stream of politically inspired attacks on Hoover from would-be revolutionaries of the "new left" or from the more conventional liberals in Congress who have had a long and vocal distaste for the chief G-man.

Of greater concern to presidential advisers are the expressed hopes of some Hoover admirers that the director step down after 46 years of dedicated service before his image as one of the nation's top crime fighters becomes tarnished by political infighting and criticism.

Flow of Security Data

There is concern, too, in the administration over alleged friction between the FBI and other intelligence agencies that resulted from the reduction in liaison activities. These were centered in a special office manned by 20 trained agents, created to insure a free flow of intelligence. The liaison office was closed last September because Hoover became dissatisfied with the handling of material by some of the other agencies.

Officials told these reporters that the flow of national security data—from the FBI to the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Central Intelligence Agency and intelligence and counterintelligence units serving the military services and the Treasury and State Departments—has been curtailed to formal, written communications. These were said to have been furnished mostly on request.

The officials who reported this viewed the liaison cutback as symptomatic of a general deterioration in the bureau's once highly acclaimed counterespionage operations which they say Hoover now keeps on a short leash to avoid possible criticism.

Specifically cited was what was described as the director's increasing reluctance to use "extralegal" means, such as bugging, wire-tapping and sometimes burglary to obtain inside information about suspected spy operations.

A top Pentagon official argued that Hoover's early reluctance to get into investigating hard-core radical revolutionaries, such as Weatherman, was one reason for the Army's controversial plunge into domestic intelligence operations.

Complaints Are Dismissed

This official, who refused to permit use of his name, said that it was Hoover's slowness to order FBI agents into a probe of radical groups in 1967, that led to President Johnson's directive that the army institute domestic intelligence operations—civilian-type spying that has brought a storm of criticism from a Senate judiciary subcommittee.

In response, FBI Inspector Bishop said that the criticism was "completely false." He said the liaison force

of 20 agents was reduced to three last fall when the bureau was under heavy pressure to provide more agents for a wide variety of assignments such as investigations of bombings, protection of airlines plagued by skyjackings and stepped-up violence by radicals.

"There has been absolutely no reduction in information going to the other intelligence agencies," he said. "We had 20 agents tied down delivering the mail to them. They did not have liaison men assigned to us. Their mail came to us by courier."

Successful Prosecution Is Aim

Instead of having a 20-man liaison office, he said, there are now three men assigned specifically to handle queries and to keep in touch with the other intelligence offices. In addition, he said, a new, high-speed teleprinter has been installed so that information can be transmitted rapidly and securely from the FBI to the offices of the other agencies.

The spokesman said that none of the agencies has complained about the change and, so far as he knew, there was no friction between the FBI and others in the intelligence community.

He dismissed the contention that the FBI had become "too timid" in conducting espionage investigations, pointing out that there were even more complaints that the bureau had been far too aggressive in the past in using bugs, wiretaps and other "extra legal" means of investigation.

"Our record in espionage cases over the years speaks for itself," he said. "There are really few experts in this field in the country. People on the sidelines who really don't know what they are talking about often think they know more than the experts, but they usually don't know all of the facts."

The primary goal in an espionage investigation is a successful prosecution, he said, and sometimes that requires restraint. There are also times when the agents working the case seek to turn the subject into a double agent or to feed him false information.

In some cases, agents are pursuing all three goals at once with different persons involved in a conspiracy, he said. To an outsider not familiar with all the facts in such a case, it might not seem that the investigation is being pursued as hard as it should be, he said.

Whatever the pros and cons of the controversy, the one thing completely solid is the evidence that the president himself has no intention now of taking action for a change of command at the FBI.

When Attorney General Mitchell said in a taped interview with David Frost—to be broadcast next Wednesday—that he expected Hoover to stay in the job, the President felt the same way, it was quite clear that the comment had full White House approval.